

## **MOISES SALAZAR TLATENCHI Quetzalcoatl in Furs**

By Laura C. Suárez Rodríguez

The work of Moises Salazar Tlatenchi makes me feel like I'm listening to a folk tale told at Drag Queen Story Hour. Though there are recognizable symbols of Christianity or the heroic epic, they are always punctuated by fleshy pink bodies typically absent from those tropes. In *En La Guardia de la Monstras Divinas*, Salazar Tlatenchi narrates a flamboyant journey from the early light of self-recognition, to the golden hour utopia of chosen family. The story is told not merely in how these figures move from work to work, but through the sensuous materials that Salazar Tlatenchi prioritizes, from crochet knits to sequins to verdant glitter. The rhythms, textures and colors unite to make the viewer *feel* beauty. The glamour and wisdom of the transfemme divine lead the audience to a queer utopia, a possible future beyond the violence of the now.

Like Queerness itself, Moises Salazar Tlatenchi's works inhabit a double space: not quite sculpture, yet sculptural; not quite painting, yet painterly. The figures are mostly faceless. Of that the artist has said, "my figures are faceless because I want folks to identify with my work." In this series, many of the faces keep their eyes, their inner corners painted a blinding white and the eyelids permanent marker black over glittery eyeshadows. The recurring figures, *Monstras Divinas*, with serpentine arms, pink skin, hairy chests, long hair muddle binary gender expectations. Yet, their eyes betray the heavy hand of a drag queen who is painting for the fans in the back row, a face beat for the gods, divine monsters. These visages ensure the viewer sees themselves in the work, while also forcing the viewer to see themselves through these Bianca del Rio eyes. Salazar Tlatenchi's figures resist gendering, and invite empathy.

As the late theorist José Esteban Muñoz wrote in the seminal *Cruising Utopia*, "Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing." Salazar Tlatenchi mobilizes queerness to imagine that thing which may be missing from our present. If Queerness is a "not-yet-here" time and place, a utopia to reach, how would a path to this Eden unfurl? How would a first-generation Mexicanx from Chicago picture that shimmering horizon? Rather than focusing on themes and aesthetics of Catholicism as they've done in the past, in this series, Salazar Tlatenchi looks to Aztec ancestors for a map to a queer future unbounded by the "prison house" of "the here and now." The serpentine travels through the pieces, invoking Quetzalcoatl, the great feathered serpent; or Coatlicue, the great mother with a snake skirt. In Aztec representational traditions, the serpent is a symbol of life, of death, of rebirth. Multimodal, the serpentine in Salazar Tlatenchi's work is both ominous and seductive; phallic and feminine; provocative and transformative. The speculative reach towards this ancestral past propels a narrative that carries the hero/ine towards an ideal future. A beautiful, haptic, luxurious, and camp future.